NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5419 JANUARY 3, 1977
CHRIS KERN

CARTER AND CONGRESS: UNFINISHED BUSINESS

ANNCR:

FOR PRESIDENT CARTER, AND THE U.S. CONGRESS, A GOOD PART OF THE NEW YEAR IS LIKELY TO BE SPENT ON UNFINISHED BUSINESS FROM 1977. CHRIS KERN HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THIS COUNTRY'S LEGISLATIVE AGENDA DOESN'T CHANGE AS CLEANLY OR DECISIVELY AS THE PAGES OF THE CALENDAR, AND THIS YEAR'S CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE IS DOMINATED BY FAMILIAR ISSUES. THE CONSENSUS IS THAT THE MOST IMPORTANT ONE IS ENERGY. PRESIDENT CARTER'S COMPREHENSIVE ENERGY PROGRAM IS DESIGNED TO RESTRICT CONSUMPTION OF SCARCE FUELS AND ENCOURAGE THE SWITCH TO NEW ENERGY SOURCES. BUT MANY MEMBERS OF CONGRESS THINK THE EMPHASIS SHOULD BE ON INCREASING PRODUCTION OF OIL AND NATURAL GAS -- A POSITION THAT IS NATURALLY SUPPORTED BY THE OIL AND GAS INDUSTRIES -- AND SOME COMPROMISE WILL HAVE TO BE WORKED OUT BEFORE MR. CARTER'S PROGRAM, OR SOME VARIANT OF IT, GOES INTO EFFECT.

MOST OF THE OTHER BIG DOMESTIC ISSUES BEFORE CONGRESS ARE ALSO HOLDOVERS FROM 1977. MR. CARTER'S PLAN FOR TAX REFORM -- HELD UP SO FAR IN HOPES IT CAN BE COORDINATED WITH NEW ENERGY-RELATED TAXES -- SHOULD COME UP BEFORE CONGRESS EARLY IN THE YEAR. NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE -- WHICH HAS BEEN UNDER CONSIDERATION NOW FOR YEARS -- IS EXPECTED TO COME TO A VOTE IN 1978, ALTHOUGH THE PRECISE FORM A NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE PLAN MIGHT TAKE IS NOT YET CLEAR. BUT THE MOST HEATED DOMESTIC ISSUE BEFORE CONGRESS MAY NOT BE A LEGISLATIVE ISSUE AT ALL, BUT RATHER THE INVESTIGATION OF ALLEGED ATTEMPTS BY THE SOUTH KOREAN GOVERNMENT TO BRIBE MEMBERS OF CONGRESS WITH LARGE CASH PAYMENTS TO THEIR ELECTION CAMPAIGNS.

THE ISSUES OF FOREIGN POLICY ARE FAMILIAR TOO. CONGRESS WILL CONSIDER THOSE TWO TREATIES NEGOTIATED LAST YEAR BY THE UNITED STATES AND PANAMA TO TURN OVER CONTROL OF THE PANAMA CANAL BY THE END OF THIS CENTURY. STRONG OPPOSITION TO THE TREATIES IS ALREADY EVIDENT FROM CONSERVATIVES WHO CHARGE THAT THEY AMOUNT TO A "GIVEAWAY" OF AMERICAN PROPERTY TO A LEFT-WING GOVERNMENT WITH CLOSE TIES TO CUBA AND THE SOVIET UNION. THE CRITICAL MOMENT FOR THE FUTURE OF THE TREATIES MAY WELL COME WHEN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES DECIDES WHETHER TO LEAVE THE QUESTION OF RATIFICATION TO THE SENATE -- WHICH IS THE USUAL PROCEDURE -- OR WHETHER TO DEMAND A SEPARATE HOUSE VOTE ON RATIFICATION BECAUSE THE TREATIES DISPOSE OF GOVERNMENT-OWNED PROPERTY.

DEFENSE AND DISARMAMENT WILL ALSO BE IMPORTANT CONGRESSIONAL ISSUES THIS YEAR. ONCE AGAIN, THE LONG-RANGE B-1 BOMBER WILL COME UP FOR WHAT COULD FINALLY BE A DECISIVE VOTE. PRESIDENT CARTER HAS BEEN LARGELY SUCCESSFUL IN HIS ATTEMPT TO STOP PRODUCTION OF THE NEW PLANE, BUT THERE IS STILL STRONG SENTIMENT FOR IT IN CONGRESS, ESPECIALLY IN VIEW OF WHAT MANY BELIEVE TO BE A CONTINUING SOVIET MILITARY BUILDUP. THAT PARTICULAR MILITARY ISSUE COULD BE OVERSHADOWED BY DEBATE OVER STRATEGIC ARMS LIMITATION. CONGRESSIONAL CRITICS DON'T LIKE THE WAY THE SALT NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE SOVIET UNION ARE GOING, AND THEY ARE EXPECTED TO MAKE A MAJOR EFFORT TO BLOCK ANY TREATY THAT THEY THINK INVOLVES TOO MANY AMERICAN CONCESSIONS.

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